

Evidence for a Chibcha-Jê connection

The genealogical composition of the South American continent is a major puzzle of historical linguistics. This talk discusses lexical and grammatical evidence for a genealogical relationship between Chibchan languages of Central America and northern South America and Macro-Jê languages, predominantly spoken in the Brazilian lowlands, south of the Amazon. The correspondences include seventeen grammatical morphemes and twenty-four lexical items (Pache 2023), such as corresponding suppletive forms – Proto-Chibchan *ⁿdaʔ ~ *taʔ ‘to go₁’, *^mbã ‘to go₂’, Proto-Northern Jê *tẽ ‘to go₁’, *mõ ‘to go₂’ – and (near-)homophones such as Proto-Chibchan *siʔ ‘thorn, tooth (incisor)’, *sih ‘meat, flesh’, Proto-Northern Jê *-jĩ ‘thorn’, *-jĩ ‘meat’ (Pache 2018, Nikulin 2020). Among the further evidence is an unusual parallel grammaticalization path in Chibchan and Macro-Jê languages, which may reflect variation that existed in the shared ancestor language (see Joseph 2012). For instance, Boruca, a Chibchan language of southeastern Costa Rica, has an inessive postposition *kabá* (Quesada Pacheco 2019: 103); its cognate counterpart in Rama (eastern Nicaragua) encodes benefactive and purposive meanings (Craig 1989: 207), as shown in (1).

Rama (Chibchan)

- (1) *jaŋ-kama*
what-PURPOSE
‘why’ (Craig 1989: 206)

Both Boruca inessive *kabá* and Rama purposive *kama* derive from a Proto-Chibchan form *ka^mba by regular sound change (see Pache 2018). The reflex of its Proto-Northern Jê counterpart, locative *kãm ~ *kãm (Nikulin 2020: 511) likewise indicates the inessive in Apinajé (Northern Jê, central Brazil) (Oliveira 2005: 147), and, in a particular construction illustrated in (2), purpose.

Apinajé (Northern Jê)

- (2) *ja kamã*
this PURPOSE
‘for that, for this reason, that’s why’ (Oliveira 2005: 147)

Together, the correspondences in question suggest a genealogical connection between Chibchan and Macro-Jê languages. This also has implications for our understanding of migration and the populating of the Americas.

References

- CRAIG, COLETTE G. 1989. A Grammar of Rama. Université de Lyon. Report to National Science Foundation, BNS 8511156. Unpublished manuscript.
- JOSEPH, BRIAN D. 2012. A variationist solution to apparent copying across related languages. Copies versus Cognates in Bound Morphology, ed. Lars Johanson and Martine Robbeets, pp. 151–64. Studies in Language, Cognition and Culture, 2. Leiden: Brill.
- NIKULIN, ANDREY. 2020. Proto-Macro-Jê: um estudo reconstrutivo. Ph.D. dissertation, Universidade de Brasília.
- OLIVEIRA, CHRISTIANE CUNHA DE. 2005. The Language of the Apinajé People of Central Brazil. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon.
- PACHE, MATTHIAS. 2018. Contributions to Chibchan Historical Linguistics. Ph.D. dissertation, Universiteit Leiden.
- _____. 2023. Evidence for a Chibcha-Jê connection. International Journal of American Linguistics 89 (2).
- QUESADA PACHECO, MIGUEL ÁNGEL. 2008. Gramática de la lengua guaymí (ngäbe). Languages of the World/Materials, 474. Munich: LINCOM Europa.